

for feeling (anxious) by freshbloom

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Summary:

He's felt anxious before, but this time it sticks, no matter how many times he reminds himself that the terror is gone, and then Mike isn't just feeling anxious, he has anxiety. It's something he's tacked onto himself. A phantom limb that serves no use other than to let him fall--everywhere but into place.

Or,

Steve and Mike help each other out.

for feeling (anxious)

Mid-way through March, it somehow becomes Steve's job to drive Mike to and from Hopper's cabin. With Hop working, Nancy licenseless and hogging Jonathon, Steve is Mike's only option (his parents are completely out of the question). He can't bike out, not with the blankets of snow smothering the entire town, and he's not going to force himself to walk, either.

It's how he ends up in Steve's car on a Saturday night, on his way home and staring blankly out the window, trying to sync his breathing with the gentle pace of snow falling from the sky. The night outside is pitch black, interrupted only by glimmering snowflakes like falling stars outside the car windows. It's almost enough to bring Mike some peace, but he's still struggling to swallow the nerves crawling up his throat. He feels trapped in this car, feels trapped in his own head, in Hawkins. He feels trapped all the time, for seemingly no reason at all.

Anxiety. That's what Will had told him, one night, when he'd confessed about feeling pressure on his chest, always, about waking up in the morning to sudden surges of panic. He's felt anxious before, but this time it sticks, no matter how many times he reminds himself that the terror is gone, and then Mike isn't just feeling anxious, he has anxiety. It's something he's tacked onto himself. A phantom limb that serves no use other than to let him fall—everywhere but into place.

"What's up with you, Wheeler?" Steve says, reaching across the seat to lightly punch Mike's shoulder.

"Huh?"

He shrugs. "You're not annoying me with stupid science facts. What's up?"

Mike rolls his eyes, and turns back to the window, feeling suddenly drained of the energy to talk. "Nothing's up, dickhead."

"Yeah, right." Steve snorts, but he's frowning. "You look kind of afraid,

dude." Mike glances back at him, briefly, and feels his stomach twist uncomfortably. Steve's brows are furrowed, mouth pulled down and face creasing with obvious signs of concern. It feels misplaced.

"I'm not afraid," He mumbles, turning back to watch the snow fall. He hopes Steve will give up, but—

"Well, you're *something*." Steve deadpans. "I'm not gonna drop it, dude."

Mike huffs, scowls, makes a point of letting Steve know how irritated he is. "Look, it's nothing, okay? I'm just—it's just—just nerves."

"Nerves?"

"That's what I just said."

"About what?"

"I don't *know*, Steve." Mike snaps. He doesn't have the energy for this.

"I'm trying to help, Wheeler. Don't be so pissy." Steve looks over at him, and though he's not hurt by Mike's anger, he's not joking around either. He wants to help.

"Sorry." He says, shame bubbling up in his stomach. He wishes he could stop being like this, could stop suffocating everyone else with his words.

"It's fine."

They drive in silence for a little while longer. It's not awkward, but it's not comfortable either. And what's even worse than the silence is the pressure in his chest, building steadily like the mounds of snow outside. It's unbearable, he almost wants to claw it out, to dig and dig and dig until there's nothing left in his chest at all.

He figures the only way he can do this is to start talking. So he tries.

"Do you ever get the feeling like, I don't know, like there's something really wrong, even if there isn't?" He says, looking at Steve, words

coming out slow and hesitant. The words seem to have lulled him into silence. He takes far too long to respond, eyes scanning the road ahead, and Mike is beginning to regret speaking at all.

"Forget it, it's stupid." He retracts, cheeks blazing with embarrassment for the second time.

"Woah woah woah, no one said it was stupid." Steve amends, punching Mike's shoulder again. "I get it. It's like a constant feeling of being under threat, no matter where you are or who you're with."

Mike just stares. Of all the people he expected to understand whatever it was he was going through, Steve had never even made the list.

"Jesus, don't look so surprised. I *do* have feelings, y'know."

"I know." It's not sarcastic, this time. He thinks Steve deserves a chance to be anything other than charming and funny.

"What do you do about it?"

"I don't know," He shrugs, tilting his head slightly in thought. "I try and pay attention to where I am and what I'm doing. If I stay focused, it's easier for me to convince myself that I'm not about to drop dead while making toast, or something."

It sounds easy enough. But Mike's tried, tried to keep his head clear and in tune with everyone else. It never works.

"I'm not like that, I can't just—just convince myself I'm okay. I can't be like that. I need to *know* that I'm okay." He says, words spilling out faster, tone growing more desperate.

"Look, you can't blame yourself, Mike. And you can't just pretend it's not happening."

He turns in his seat suddenly, ready to fire back a defense, to yell and get angry and to tell him that it's not that easy. He can't just stay focused. Can't just look at everyone else and pretend he's not still prodding and poking at his own emotional bruises. Can't keep track of his breathing or how many times he's woken at 3am, sweating and

panting from the heat of his own fear. Mike hasn't had the energy to keep track of anything at all, lately. He's convinced himself that this means progress—he's no longer counting the days in his head, or keeping track of how many times he's stumbled into his house to find his Mom crying and his Dad gone. There are too many days to remember them all and his parents fight more times a week than there are numbers he can count, and he can't fucking focus—everything is too much. But he doesn't graffiti the bathroom stall, and he hands in his assignments, and he goes to science every day, though he's still deathly afraid of the classroom (*of stepping in to find the lights flickering and the blackboard cracked and splintered and El—gone*). This must mean he's doing better.

At least, that's what he hopes. But his heart is still sitting off kilter, somehow both frozen in place and beating far too fast, and sometimes, when he sees his friends, he gets a sharp feeling in his chest—as though he's being pulled taught from the inside. He can't understand why, or what it means. They're his friends, he has no reason to fear them. But something about the thought of being with them, of being surrounded by their ease and their happiness and their comfort, seals his lungs shut and litters his skin with goosebumps. He's afraid his shaking hands will twitch and fidget until he's accidentally toppled the fragile balance they've scraped together off the table. And on the days where his chest feels heavier than he can manage, he thinks he's not quite sure how he fits in anymore—Mike, who has trouble breathing in the morning, who is carrying around a storm in his stomach, cracked like lightning and spewing fear, everywhere, feels too caught in the cold to be surrounded by their warmth. He knows they're struggling, too, but his struggling feels out of place. His trauma is lagging one step behind. Always last to smile, last to get the joke, last to say *it's okay, we're okay*. He doesn't know how they manage it, or why it is he's been stuck recovering in a way that is separate to the rest, separate to himself.

Mike, not alone, not lonely.

Lonesome.

He shifts, looks at his hands, the window, anywhere but Steve, trying to think of what to say without revealing how he's feeling. Finally, he

settles on,

"What do you know?" The words are laced with more anger than he intended. He winces, but doesn't bother trying to reconcile. Somewhere along the way, the anger became second nature, and he's not sure now's the right time to fix it.

Steve only rolls his eyes. "Yeah, I guess you're right." He mumbles.

"I can't even face your sister anymore, so who am I to talk about avoiding problems." His eyes go wide and his mouth drops open in shock, like he hadn't meant to say any of it out loud.

"*Fuck.*" He mutters, and suddenly, Steve's the one shifting in his seat, eyes set on the road ahead, blatantly trying to pretend Mike isn't sitting right next to him.

Mike furrows his brow. "You're avoiding her?"

"Did I say avoiding? I meant uh..."

"Yeah, nice try Steve." Mike says, eyes scanning over Steve's face. Suddenly, he feels overwhelmingly sympathetic for him. He's been stuck hiding around Hawkins, fearing Nancy like some sort of ghost.

"You should talk to her. She won't say it but she's afraid you're angry with her, she should know you're not."

"Huh," Steve looks surprised, like he hadn't expected Mike to care all that much. "So, you're giving me advice now?"

Mike snorts. "Yeah, well, no offense, but your advice colossally *sucks*"

"Watch it, Wheeler. I can still make you walk home."

"Like, really? '*Act like you don't care.*' Yeah, Dustin shared that one—"

"I swear to god I will push you out of this moving vehicle—"

"And honestly, don't even get me *started* on his hair at the Snowball—"'

"Alright!" Steve yells. "I got it, dickhead!"

But Mike's laughing, and Steve is reaching over to ruffle his hair, and the night feels a little less toxic. The laughter fills him up, makes him feel buoyant, like he could float away with the snowflakes outside and he's surprised to find that by the time they're pulling up to his driveway, his anxiety has lulled to a gentle hum.

He figures he owes Steve one last piece of advice before he leaves.

"Look, I'm just saying, dude. You can't keep hiding from her forever." A pause—he's not sure he should say what else he's thinking, but Mike figures he deserves to know, if it'll help.

"I'm pretty sure she misses you, anyway." He spares a glance back at Steve; he's staring down the road with a pained look on his face, knuckles stark white against the steering wheel. For a second, the pressure in Mike's chest flares up again. He's scared—almost terrified—that he's said the wrong thing, and he's desperate to get out of the car before Steve can snap at him. But he doesn't. Instead, he looks back at Mike, and takes a deep breath.

"Right," He clears his throat. "Thanks."

"No problem." Mike smiles—a real, genuine smile, and he hopes Steve knows that he's thankful he's here. That Nancy is too, that they all are. That he deserves all the good things he's constantly offering everyone else.

Steve smiles back, a real, genuine smile. "Now get the fuck out of my car."

"Oh my god," Mike mumbles, reaching for the door handle. "I take it back, asshole."

He steps out, shutting the door behind him. He can hear Steve laugh before he drives off, and though Mike is lonesome and exhausted, and there are more days to face where he will have to teach his lungs to breathe again—he thinks he feels his heart shift the slightest bit closer into place.

Author's Note:

i haven't written in so long so this is really rough, but i hope you enjoyed it!! pls let me know what you thought, i live off validation (also i like hearing what you all have to say). this isn't what i had in mind for this fic when i started writing it, but i think it turned out somewhat okay. i've never written steve before so i had fun with that, i just hope it's not too out of character, and that everything flows really well. i also don't know if it would still be snowing in march in hawkins, but im just basing it off of the weather i get here (there's a snowstorm happening as im writing this).

title is from Anxious by Hippo Campus (a beautiful song 11/10 would recommend you listen)

come chat with me about why steve and mike deserve more scenes together on my tumblr
@scoopsahoysteve :-))